

# Accident Database

**Report ID# 3094**

Help

2009-06-06
Date
Chris Odum
Victim
38
Victim Age
Blackwater River
River
Blue Bend Road to US 220
Section
Rocky Mount Water Withdrawl Facility (Low Head Dam) United States Virginia, US
Location
777 cfs - 4.2 feet
Gage
High
Water Level
River Difficulty
Caught in Low Head Dam Hydraulic
Cause

Injury Type(s)

– Does not Apply

Factors

– High Water

Extensive Experience

Victim Experience Level

Private

Trip Type

Open Canoe

Boat Type

Group Info

Other Victim Names

Reported

Status



# Accident Description

Narrative by Scott Martin on 2009-06-09

Low head dam caused fatality. Victim became trapped in a hydraurlic at a low head dam. The river was flowing strongly given recent rains - about two foot over normal conditions. Victim was a skilled paddler and was wearing his lifevest. Individuals in the group attempted a rescue with throw ropes from boats and then shore. Victim grabbed throw rope but was unable to be pulled, or pull his way out, of the recirculating hydraulic.

Responders were on scene within minutes of the accident but were unable to revive the victim. Chris is survived by his partner, Lisa, and two sons (Scott, 17) and Bryce (15). Chris was a founding member of a local paddling club and an avid paddler.

TEXT ATTACHMENTS <http://www.thefranklinnewspost.com/article.cfm?ID=13798>

**Morris mourns loss of a paddling friend**

**Wednesday, June 10, 2009**

By MORRIS STEPHENSON -

My deepest sympathy goes out to family, relatives and friends of Chris Odum. I know I

Chris, 38, drowned Saturday afternoon when his canoe capsized on the Blackwater River. He battled for his life after his canoe went over the four-foot dam at Rocky Mount's water treatment plant. The dam is just upstream from the Route 220 bridge river access.

The river was swollen after some four to five inches of rain had fallen during a three-day period in the mountains around Callaway. Both the Blackwater and Pigg Rivers were "born" there.

My friend Lt. Karl Martin of the VDGIF called Monday morning and gave me his official report of the accident. At the end of his report, he told me that those in Chris's party had all the right equipment and did the right things. "It was one of those tragic things," he said. He did, however, remind all paddlers, regardless of experience, to use good judgment and stay off the rivers after heavy rains.

The U.S. Geological Survey gauge at Route 122 showed the Blackwater River was rolling at 11 feet and 4,000 cfs (cubic feet per second) on Friday at its peak. Saturday, the river had dropped to a shade over four feet by Saturday afternoon.

Recreation and beginners can float sections of the BW upstream of the dam at two to three feet.

After talking to Karl, I talked with Lisa Zeigler, Chris's companion for 20 years as of April. She gave me her account of what happened.

Chris, Greg Austin and Noel Zeigler were in canoes, while Lisa was floating in a yellow kayak. Actually, Lisa was the first to go around the dam after her kayak flipped and she was tossed out. (Note-Her kayak was returned by Brian Hart who lives in the Blue Bend area. A kayaker who found it left it with Brian.) Before the floaters reached the dam, Lisa said someone behind her yelled to her. She leaned to turn around, the kayak tilted and started taking on water. The kayak flipped while she was still behind the dam, she said. After several unsuccessful attempts to get the kayak up on the bank, Lisa was washed through the fish ladder, which is part of the right side of the dam. She recalls Chris telling her to let the kayak go, but she said she didn't want the kayak coming in from behind her and hitting her on the head.

Lisa said Austin was going to take a look at the dam from the left side of the river before he decided if he was going to attempt going over it. However, a limb Austin was holding snapped. Austin had no choice but to go over the dam on river left, or the left side, she remembered. Noel Zeigler, a non-swimmer, was behind them, along with four other

Zeigler finally managed to get out. "I was weak, and when I got out, I was so cold I was shivering."

Chris went over the dam a little left of center because he had drifted too close to the structure to stop, Lisa believes. "When he went over, the canoe flipped back toward the dam," Lisa continued. "Chris was wearing a life jacket and was a strong swimmer. He never gave up. I saw him go down and come up three times. They tried throwing a rope bag to him, but he couldn't hang on," she said. Lisa did not know how much time passed before they managed to get Chris out of the water. She said one of the women in the group of kayakers knew CPR and was telling Austin what to do. "What he (Austin) was doing was working," but the effort was unsuccessful. Chris and Lisa have two teenage sons, who did not make the float Saturday.

The couple was big supporters and very active members of the Creek Freaks. Everyone who knew them agreed they were a fun couple and a joy to be around.

The last time I talked to Chris and Lisa, it was at Hema's. Of course, the three of us were talking about paddling. I will never forget that day. Chris said something about he had always admired me and thanked me for what I had done to promote paddling in the county and helping start the CFs. His compliment touched me.

Before the conversation ended, he said something like he wanted to paddle with me one day soon. It was something he had always wanted to do, he added.

I thanked him and told him anytime they were going to float to give me a call because I'd like to paddle with them just as much. Something in the back of my mind tells me we passed each other during one of the three Pigg River Ramble floats, but I'm not sure which one.

I really got to know Chris and Lisa through the Creek Freak paddlers. They, like myself, loved the river. I liked them a whole lot. And I deeply appreciated what Chris had said when we last talked. It meant much to me, and I will never forget it that evening. Maybe one day in another time and place, Chris and I can make that float together. I'd like that.

**Lost Boats:** Anyone who finds lost canoes or kayaks should report it to the sheriff's department or Jennifer Martin, Creek Freak president, at 420-3235.

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can speak for all members of the Creek Freak Paddlers of Franklin County and the entire paddling community. Chris, 38, drowned Saturday afternoon when his canoe capsized on the Blackwater River. He battled for his life after his canoe went over the four-foot dam at Rocky Mount's water treatment plant.

The dam is just upstream from the Route 220 bridge river access. The river was swollen after some four to five inches of rain had fallen during a three-day period in the mountains around Callaway. Both the Blackwater and Pigg Rivers were "born" there. My friend Lt. Karl Martin of the VDGIF called Monday morning and gave me his official report of the accident. At the end of his report, he told me that those in Chris's party had all the right equipment and did the right things. "It was one of those tragic things," he said. He did, however, remind all paddlers, regardless of experience, to use good judgment and stay off the rivers after heavy rains. The U.S. Geological Survey gauge at Route 122 showed the Blackwater River was rolling at 11 feet and 4,000 cfs (cubic feet per second) on Friday at its peak. Saturday, the river had dropped to a shade over four feet by Saturday afternoon. Leisure and beginners can float sections of the BW upstream of the dam at two to three feet.

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Noel Zeigler, a non-swimmer, was behind them, along with four other kayakers whose names she did not know. Noel Zeigler elected to get out of his canoe and tie it to something on the embankment. After she was washed down the river, Lisa Zeigler finally managed to get out. "I was weak, and when I got out, I was so cold I was shivering." Chris went over the dam a little left of center because he had drifted too close to the structure to stop, Lisa believes. "When he went over, the canoe flipped back toward the dam," Lisa continued. "Chris was wearing a life jacket and was a strong swimmer. He never gave up. I saw him go down and come up three times. They tried

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### **Action may prevent another river tragedy**

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

A drowning on the Blackwater River on Saturday was a tragedy from any perspective, and our sympathies go out to the friends and family of the victim. An avid paddler and member of the Creek Freaks, Chris Odum was an experienced navigator of the county's rivers and a very strong swimmer.

But through a series of unpredictable events, he was caught up in a river hazard that was simply too dangerous and powerful to overcome -- a "hydraulic" caused by the river current tumbling over a short, or "low-head," dam. It's a problem that all river runners are aware of, and strive to avoid, but it's also a problem that can be fixed. This was certainly not the way anyone wanted to bring attention to the river hazards, but it does drive home the fact that these hazards can be deadly. Plans have already been made to eliminate the hydraulic at the dam on the Pigg River at the Franklin County Veterans' Memorial Park by removing a section of the dam, and the design will not only get rid of the danger, it will make the area safe and fun for river enthusiasts. The Pigg River dam hydraulic has been particularly troubling because it lies below a steep bank at the memorial park and is a popular place to fish. Someone, especially a small child, falling into the river at the wrong place and time could be tragic.

necessary funding to do so. We also understand that the town is looking into solving the problem at the dam at the Rocky Mount water treatment plant, where the tragedy occurred on Saturday. Franklin County has two great rivers that are being enjoyed by an ever-increasing number of local residents, as well as visitors. Let's make these rivers as safe as possible.



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